

VZCZCXRO2828

RR RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR

DE RUEHYE #0885/01 3561348

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

R 221348Z DEC 09

FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9888

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000885

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV TU AJ AM

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKER WEIGHS IN ON FOREIGN POLICY AND DOMESTIC REFORMS

REF: A. YEREVAN 871

1B. YEREVAN 831

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Parliamentary Speaker Abrahamian believes, based on conversation with his Turkish counterpart, that the Turkish Parliament has the votes necessary to ratify the Turkey-Armenia normalization protocols, if the government makes the political decision to proceed. On democracy and human rights, Abrahamian argues that, particularly in comparison with Azerbaijan, Armenia (or more specifically, he) is taking important steps. The Speaker seems noticeably less enthused, however, about serious efforts to tackle corruption and conflict of interest in government in ways that might undermine his own, growing power base or net worth. END SUMMARY.

PARLIAMENTARY DIPLOMACY WITH THE TURKS

¶2. (C) National Assembly Speaker Hovik Abrahamian shared with Ambassador on December 17 the positive recent interaction he had with his counterpart in the Turkish Parliament, Mehmet Ali Sahin. On the margins of a November Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) forum in Moscow, he and the Turkish Speaker had what Abrahamian described as a "very constructive" meeting discussing bilateral relations. Abrahamian expressed his support for the Turkey-Armenia normalization process, said Armenia should have no eternal friends or enemies, and asked why, when there is close to \$250 million in trade between Turkey and Armenia passing through Georgia this year, they shouldn't just cut out the middle-man. In response to Abrahamian's question about when Turkey would ratify the normalization protocols, Sahin reportedly said he expected the Foreign Affairs committee to make its recommendation to the Parliament in December. He noted that though the opposition was strong, "if the political decision is made, we won't have problems ratifying." Sahin also, according to Abrahamian, promised to do everything he could to secure ratification.

¶3. (C) Abrahamian said he told Sahin that parliamentary diplomacy could help their presidents. The two agreed that their MPs should meet, and agreed to find other opportunities for such interaction. Sahin suggested that BSEC in Istanbul could extend an invitation to Abrahamian and others to come to Turkey under its auspices in order to afford the parliamentarians bilateral meetings on the side -- an invitation Abrahamian told Ambassador he had just received the day before. Before accepting, though, Abrahamian said he would need to consult with President Sargsian, and would need to be assured that the Turkish Parliament intends to ratify within a reasonable time-frame. "Imagine how it would look," Abrahamian worried, if he went and ratification did not

follow: "It wouldn't be dignified." (COMMENT: Abrahamian did not seem to appreciate that the real value in parliamentary exchanges would be in building support for ratification, rather than as a pre-victory lap for a done deal.)

ARMENIAN PATIENCE HAS ITS LIMITS

¶4. (C) The Speaker confirmed that a group of Armenian experts was looking into mechanisms for canceling Armenia's signature of the protocols should Turkey not ratify in a reasonable time-frame. He denied that Armenia would consider ratifying first in order to put pressure on the Turks, with a trigger to withdraw should Turkey not hold up its end. (COMMENT: We suspect Abrahamian may be working from an old talking point, and that Armenia ratifying first may be on the table. See ref A. END COMMENT.) He said the National Assembly would wait until the end of March before taking any action to withdraw signature. (NOTE: This is the latest deadline we have heard. The Presidency and MFA say January/February.) He asked Ambassador to imagine the problems the government would face if this were not settled by April 24, Armenia's Day of Remembrance.

ALIYEV THE AGGRESSOR

¶5. (C) On Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) negotiations, Abrahamian said Azerbaijani President Aliyev was obviously trying to gain benefits from a linkage to the normalization process. He said President Sargsian was unhappy with Aliyev's "aggressive attitude" in their last meeting, and with his making

YEREVAN 00000885 002 OF 002

additional demands never discussed before. Abrahamian said Armenia is ready for mutual, reasonable concessions, and is interested in continuing to pursue resolution within the context of the OSCE. He then launched into a complaint about Azerbaijani war rhetoric, Aliyev's elimination of presidential term limits, and what he called the mild American response to such warmongering and anti-democratic processes.

ARMENIAN PROGRESS ON DEMOCRACY...

¶6. (C) Abrahamian used his critique of Aliyev's becoming "another sultan" to segue into a discussion of his own democratic credentials. He said he had been the first to argue for the opposition's rights to free assembly, arguing that banning rallies only increased interest. "Now not even 100 show up" for organized protests, he noted. He said he had been the one to suggest to the opposition that they should bring any issue of concern up for public hearings, as with those he recently arranged on the NGO draft law (ref B).

¶7. (C) On detainees held in connection with the March 1 post-election violence, he said he had discussed with the President the need to review cases to see what could be done to release them. He agreed with the Ambassador that the benefits of releasing them, both domestically and internationally, far outweighed the costs. He said they would use parole, suspended sentences, and pardons where possible, and would review remaining cases in January. Abrahamian said, however, that some of those detained in connection with March 1 should not go free, as with Nikol Pashinian, whom the Speaker considered the main instigator of the violence, and someone "with ten murders on his head."

...BUT ON TRANSPARENCY, NOT SO MUCH

¶8. (C) Abrahamian's progressive language seemed to fade as talk turned to the fight against corruption. He characterized the Prime Minister, generally viewed as a

reformer in the area, as someone who gives a good speech but does little else. He told of challenging the PM publicly to articulate exactly what tools or leverage he lacks for the fight against corruption and oligopolies, suggesting that he received no satisfactory answer in reply. "Speeches and actions have to match!" he said. Without any noticeable sense of irony, he went on to ridicule the PM's asset declaration draft law that would require 500 most senior public officials to come clean about their holdings and business interests. "I don't accept such things," he proclaimed.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Abrahamian is widely considered one of Sargsian's most formidable rivals, and someone who is carefully building up his own power base. His instincts are not progressive (contacts speak of him as an unsophisticated thug), but sometimes his political calculations are. With detainees or the NGO law, for example, Abrahamian likely concluded there was decent upside and limited cost to at least presenting himself as an advocate for inclusiveness and reconciliation. But where a reform agenda collides with his personal or political interests, as with a draft law requiring him to reveal his considerable business holdings, he reverts to what most suspect is his true, thuggish form. Our challenge is to influence his political calculations by highlighting international interest in a progressive agenda. On Turkey-Armenia, we will look for ways to support his parliamentary diplomacy, playing to his sense that he has a valuable potential role in this historic process -- an appeal that has the added virtue of being true.

PENNINGTON